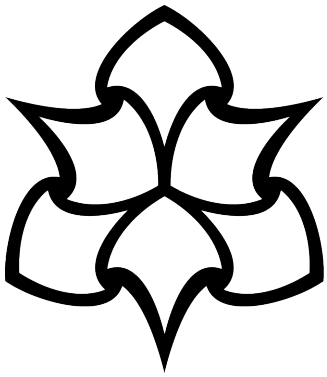

The doctrine of hell has been a vexed issue among Christians since the earliest times. Broadly speaking, the disputants can be grouped into three camps: (1) traditionalists, who claim that the damned suffer forever in hell; (2) conditionalists, who say that the damned suffer for a finite time in hell before being completely annihilated by God; and (3) universalists, who say that ultimately all will be saved, though some universalists (called restorationists) maintain that some people will arrive in heaven only after a temporary stop in hell that serves to remove their sins and make them worthy of salvation. While bookshelves are awash with lengthy tomes written by traditionalists and universalists defending their respective positions, defenses of conditionalism have tended to be restricted to journal articles and chapters in edited collections—at least until now, with James S. Spiegel's book, *Hell and Divine Goodness: A Philosophical-Theological Inquiry*, purporting to be the first book-length defense of conditionalism.

To assess the comparative merits of the three positions, Spiegel devotes the opening chapter of the book to investigating the biblical data, ultimately concluding that while each view "enjoys at least some *prima facie* biblical support . . . from an exegetical standpoint, conditionalism has the most scriptural support among the three views" (31–32). But "most scriptural support" does not amount to overwhelming scriptural support, by Spiegel's own admission, and he concedes that the biblical evidence does not unambiguously favor any of the three positions. With the biblical data inconclusive, Spiegel suggests that the balance can be tipped for a particular side only by a close philosophical analysis of the three positions on hell, this being the task of the remaining chapters of the book.

Chapter 2, with its focus on divine justice, begins with the oft-made objection to traditionalists that sending anyone to hell for eternity would be "infinitely disproportionate" (35) to their crimes, which renders the notion of eternal conscious torment unjust. Spiegel assesses the various ways traditionalists try to respond to the objection but finds them all wanting. That is strike one against traditionalism. The discussion then turns to the question of whether annihilation after a finite sojourn in hell—the conditionalist position—would be a more extreme punishment than the eternal conscious torment in hell that traditionalists suppose awaits the damned. Spiegel explains that some traditionalists assume that eternal conscious torment in hell is the more extreme of the two punishments, and that they think this makes their position more palatable on the basis that the damned deserve the most extreme punishment possible.

Against this, Spiegel advances several reasons for thinking that annihilation is in fact the more extreme punishment, which he takes to be strike two against traditionalism, or at least against those traditionalists who favor the position based on their belief that it offers the most extreme form of punishment. Accordingly, I am inclined here to see Spiegel making an *ad hominem* argument against these kinds of traditionalists rather than a positive argument for conditionalism as such, for as far as I can tell he does not argue that the more extreme the punishment the better (which would, in any case, sit rather awkwardly alongside his affirmation that God is loving and merciful; 59–60).

Chapter 3 concerns the so-called "problem of hell," which turns on the difficulty of identifying a "sufficient reason" for God to permit or cause the evils associated with hell (58). Traditionalism is again Spiegel's principal target, and he considers whether the free-will defense or the soul-making theodicy might enable the traditionalist to justify eternal conscious torment in hell, ultimately deciding that neither can. So, strike three against traditionalism.

After a brief discussion about whether there are philosophical grounds for thinking the soul immortal, chapter 4 turns to an examination of a range of philosophical objections against universalism (for example, that universalism operates with "a diminished concept of salvation" (88) since at most it allows for a theoretical and so non-genuine possibility of damnation). These objections, Spiegel claims at the end of chapter 4, leave us "warranted in believing that not everyone is saved in the end" (100)—so, strikes one, two, and three against universalism.

Moreover, "given the severe problems with the traditionalist doctrine of eternal conscious torment, this constitutes a fairly strong recommendation of the conditionalist view" (100). The suggestion seems to be that conditionalism is the preferred doctrine because the two rival positions are beset by the serious problems Spiegel has identified throughout chapters 2 to 4, whereas conditionalism is not. And indeed, those hoping to find meaty philosophical arguments in favor of conditionalism will find little to chew on here, where conditionalism emerges victorious more by a process of elimination (or should that be annihilation?) rather than by being shown to stand firm on solid philosophical arguments. This is not to say that Spiegel's book lacks punch, for this is not the case. Philosophically minded Christians will benefit hugely from the intricate philosophical analysis of the three doctrines of hell, and proponents of both traditionalism and universalism will both feel challenged by his philosophical assaults on their respective positions here.

The final chapter of the book focuses on what Spiegel calls "the problem of heavenly grief" (105), which concerns how the blessed in heaven could be happy when they know that loved ones are undergoing punishment in hell. Spiegel accepts that this is as much a problem for the conditionalist as it is for the traditionalist, since on the former position the blessed will know that loved ones who are damned will be punished and then annihilated—knowledge that might reasonably cause grief to the blessed in heaven. Spiegel's suggested solution is what he terms "the love-web approach," which suggests that "all of those people who were loved by the redeemed eventually find their way to salvation and eternal life in heaven, even if for some the route to redemption runs through hell" (119). In other words, the blessed would only be temporarily separated from their loved ones, who by virtue of being loved by the blessed would eventually join them in heaven. The suggestion is intriguing and deserves a fuller treatment than the few pages devoted to it here.

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